

Towards coping with the major contemporary challenges of the classroom teacher in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study takes a look at the major contemporary challenges that confront the classroom teacher in Nigeria as he discharges his duties. The primary and secondary teacher should face almost identical problems in the system with the problems of the university and other higher education teacher slightly different but similar. The teacher is primarily faced with the problem of meeting the wide demand and expectation of the pupils and students' parents and guardians and the society as large but in spite of this unlimited expectations, he works under every poor and un conducive environment; he has no good office to do his study; he has no sufficient classroom to teach his pupils and students; he has no teaching equipment and facilities and above these, he is poorly motivated and is not accorded the respect as with other professions. These challenges, notwithstanding, the teacher owes it a duty to do well. The study therefore, examines these major challenges and suggests ways through which the teacher can become the real teacher and thus more effective to achieve the desired results of his calling.

INTRODUCTION

Who is a teacher? According to Wikipedia, a teacher is someone acknowledged as a guide or helper in the process of learning. In these broad senses, all those who are helpful as regards the evolution inherent in all ways of learning are looked upon as teachers but in modern schools and most contemporary societies where scientific pedagogy is practiced, teaching is a specialized profession on the same level with many other professions. Professionally, the teacher is a specialist in teaching who guides the pupils through a variety of selected experiences to bring about worthwhile changes in their behaviours. The teacher is in the profession on the basis of civil contract terms of employment but in strict professional terms, he is a teacher by virtue of having acquired the requisite professional training and in Nigeria today of having registered with the Nigeria Teachers' Council (NTC). Professionalism has come in because teaching is an art and a science.

It is an art because it involves guiding, directing and stimulating learning. It is also, a science because it involves the processing of a body of specialized knowledge. The teacher is to see that the child develops the right skills, assimilate the facts, right habits and ethical standards. The child having gone through the teachers' artistically and scientifically presented learning experiences acquires and utilizes the right knowledge to a desired and acceptable level or standard. For these reasons, teaching is intricate and exerting, posing a lot of challenges to the teacher.

Gadsby and Rundell stated that a challenging phenomenon tests the abilities or skills of someone. In view of the major objectives of teaching outlined above, a lot of challenges confront the contemporary Nigerian classroom teacher.

The challenges become more apparent with the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) declaration that no education system can rise above the level of its teachers. The teacher must therefore be effective and his effectiveness (Ajeyalemi, 2005) is demonstrated in:

- Mastery of the subject matter as well as the philosophy and goals of teaching that subject at that level
- Mastery of general and subject-specific teaching strategies
- Knowledge of the learner, learning theories, principles and methods

- Good personality as a leader and positive attitudes to the students and subject matter
- Contending with social vices in the school system

Mastery of the subject matter, philosophy and goals of teaching: The teacher, traditionally was a mentor who was looked upon as an oracle of society. He was always right and his ideas were incontestable but over the years with the emergence of more lucrative professions like law, medicine and banking, teaching as a profession sank in value and the teachers' worth had dwindled considerably. Although, his roles in society grow in importance by day with a steady rise in the value of education, the image of the modern teacher in contemporary Nigeria is that of an intellectual light weight. The general opinion is that the quality of intake into teacher education programme is low as the majority of them are rejects from other courses in the university.

Students taking courses that led to the award of Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) are seen as people who have failed to gain entry into the university. Education students are generally, seen as being of low caliber in terms of entry qualifications and teacher-training as a last resort for them after failing to get into more lucrative and job satisfying professions. It has almost become impossible to convince intelligent students to choose a teaching career.

A UNESCO report by Ajeyalemi (2005) observed that school teachers in Africa are unmotivated, under qualified, underpaid and lack confidence and many have chosen their profession for lack of something better to do.

The National Universities Commission conducted a needs assessment survey of labour market expectations of teachers and found that most of the graduates teachers produced from the universities were shallow in subject matter knowledge and as such incompetent in the teaching of a large number of topics in their subjects. Modern Nigerian society views the teacher as incompetent in his job, occasioned in part by his shallow knowledge of his subject. Most teachers have been known to be accosted by learned parents of wards under the teachers' tutelage and be seriously faulted in the notes or test scores awarded by these teachers.

The teacher is no longer the oracle of knowledge revered by the society but a low rated professional whose knowledge of his subject is suspect. This issue is a major challenge to the Nigerian classroom teacher. He must prove to the society that he is not intellectually wanting that he knows his subject well enough to teach the level of students that have been assigned to him that he is conversant with the philosophy and goals of teaching that subject at that 5 level. He may have chosen teaching because of his inability to get something better to do but since, he has found himself in the profession, he has to strive to be highly knowledgeable in his chosen field. Poor remuneration of teachers could be very discouraging in the teachers' pursuit of professional excellence, especially when compared with the high pay packets of his counterparts in other professions. A recent attempt by Nigerian primary and secondary teachers to earn meaningfully through, the Teacher's Salary Scale (TSS) only attracted a 27 and half increment of their basic salaries compared with the earning of those in the legal or medical profession, the increment is peanuts but then beyond poor salary, the teacher needs an improved image; he needs to be trusted to be able to carry out his responsibility; he can earn respect arising from professional excellence, even though it may not be on the same level with those of lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc.

Just like there are oases in the desert, most teachers have been known to receive gift from parents for been responsible for the improvement of their ward's academic performance. Such occurrences are rare but they nonetheless, underscore the fact that the teacher can gather respect for himself through an adjudged competence in his profession.

The teacher is not supposed to be deficient in the knowledge of the subject he teaches. Teaching is about learning and so, one of the duties of the teacher is to seek and acquire relevant knowledge continually. This he should do through professional self-development and career advancement. He should undertake remedial programmes that can enhance his performance in his profession. The teacher should mould his career and not leave it to chance. He should in view of these, modern challenges, study hard using his own private resources which he ought to acquire and also by using public resources.

The teacher who does this will be able to meet societal expectations of him. The teacher should not underrate his sacred profession but rather give it, its place of importance because without it there can be no training of the nation's manpower needs for the political, economic social development of the society.

Mastery of general and subject-specific teaching strategies: The major thing that makes the education graduate a professional teacher when compared with his counterparts that graduated in the sciences, arts or the social sciences is the fact that he had gone through well-programmed institutional courses on the art and the methodology of teaching. It is not enough for a teacher to be a master of his subject. He must be well acquainted with the art and science of teaching. It is expected of him to be able to arrange the set of learning experiences in such a way that the desired changes are produced in the lives of the learners.

This underscores the need for the right method and approach in the teacher's delivery of his subject in the class. The challenge before the teacher is daunting when it is considered that apart from the accuracy of his subject matter, the appropriateness of his method is basically judged by the learner's appropriate behaviour as a result of the learner having gone through properly planned and arranged set of learning experiences. Societal perception blames the teachers most of the time for the poor academic performance of the students implying that the teacher's success in his profession is tied to that of his students.

The challenge before the teacher becomes more tasking when we consider that in Nigeria today, schools are inundated with the problems of inadequate basic infrastructures and shortage of learning materials. The worse hit areas are the sciences where lack of good laboratories for experimental instruction has reduced the teaching of the sciences to mere study. Those who graduate from this system become study tigers full of ideas that are not matched with requisite practical skills. In this kind of system, the teacher needs much initiative and well-developed skills of improvisation to carry out his functions effectively.

The researchers has to improvise teaching aids; he has to dig deep into the depth of his skills to keep his class lively and make the students concentrate in an environment of dilapidated buildings and other old damaged infrastructure. The challenge is intimidating as society expects the best from him in the midst of these obstacles to learning.

Knowledge of the learner, learning methods, principles and theories: The teacher needs to know the learner well enough as well as the methods, principles and theories that he can apply in the learner's unique circumstances and situation. The school is made up of students with diverse cultural and socio-economic background and emotional make-up.

A good knowledge of child development and its application in the classroom setting will help the teacher in performing his duties well. Most parents are training their words in very adverse economic circumstances. Their words are rarely fed; they lack books and other learning materials and are generally, frustrated. Students in these conditions are ill motivated to study. In the midst of these students' psychological imbalance, the teacher is expected to bring about desired changes in their behaviour. This is a major challenge for the teacher. Cox (2008) states that some of the key challenges a teacher faces with the students include:

- Listening to young people
- Being youth driven
- Building relationships
- Respecting boundaries
- Being sensitive to differences
- Focusing on the young person
- Providing support, encouragement and challenge (academic, music, sports, community services, cultural, etc.)
- Being realistic

- Giving quality time
- Offering guidance

Good personality as a teacher and positive attitudes to the students and the subject matter: The teacher does not only communicate subject matter but also attitudes and behaviour. He is a representative of the adult society and the value it stands for. As the role model, he needs to win their confidence to be able to assist them adequately. According to Cox (2008), students would value teachers who would meet some of their expectations which includes:

- A wise, trusted and dependable friend who can still be an authority figure
- Focuses on the needs of the students
- Teaches students how to express themselves assertively in emotional situations rather than aggressively or passively
- Encourage a caring and supportive non-judgmental relationship
- Seeks to empower students with key life skills which students learn from role model teacher-mentors
- Teaches students to be responsible for their behaviour choices
- Encourages and inspires students to develop their personal vision for the future
- Assists with the setting and attaining of realistic, achievable and measurable goals
- Aims to see ongoing improvement in the student's daily environment (academic, cultural activities, sport, community involvement)
- Teacher's students to improve their self-worth, pride and confidence levels
- Wherever possible works with the students' parents/caregivers to provide support, friendship as well as wise counsel to the students
- Offer suggestions, insight and advice, allowing students to make personal decisions and choices
- Stands up for the students when this is needed e.g., writing a job reference, supporting an application for entry to an education institution, agreeing to be a referee on a student's resume

Contending with social vices in the school system: Agabi and Egbezor (2005) identified social vices as posing a challenge in the school system. Hogan (2006) defined vice as disapproved behaviour that violates a breakdown in the national ethics and discipline. This anomaly has found its way into the school system because the school as a miniature society will always reflect the culture of the larger society.

These vices among students pose a serious challenge to the teacher who as a character modular must ensure that the student imbibe the right culture. Some of the vices in the school system that every teacher has to contend with. According to Ezewu (1983) and Okpilike (2001), especially at the secondary school level include:

Stealing: This includes stealing from fellow students and stealing school property. Also withholding school fees given to the child by parents.

Dishonesty: This includes with holding or falsifying report cards or results, cheating at examination (examination malpractices), telling lies and impersonating.

Sex offences: These include receiving the opposite sex in the dormitory having sex within and around the school, certified cases of venereal diseases, pregnancy and possession of pornographic literature and abortion.

Disobedience: These include flouting specific orders and wearing the wrong uniform.

Truancy: This includes returning days or weeks after schools has resumed, leaving school without authorization and dodging specific lesson periods.

Assault and insult: This includes beating up junior students, frequent fighting, fighting members of staff and general disrespectful behaviour.

Drug offence: These includes smoking cigarette and Indian hemp, keeping or using drugs alleged to aid memory, keeping or using drug for regular diseases but not prescribed by a doctor, keeping or using drugs alleged to prevent or abort pregnancies, snuffing tobacco and indulgence in alcohol.

Wickedness: This include oppression of junior students, willful destruction of junior students, property, destruction of school property and roughness.

Strike and mass demonstration: This includes demonstrations or strikes against teachers' method of teaching, inadequate classrooms, the rules of the schools, high cost of feeds, examination time table and non-offering of some subjects at the certificate examination.

Suicide: Death arising from a deliberate act of self destruction or from inaction when it is known that inaction will have fatal consequences on one's life.

Cultism: This means belonging to secret cults (groups) for secret purposes, promotion of lawlessness and violence, quest for power, terrorizing fellow students and general anarchy.

Commenting on these vices in the school system Ezewu (1983) observed that despite very strict school regulations preventing students from engaging in these vices they are on the increase in present day Nigeria schools. This shows that the external pressure to make individuals conform to the norms of society are not always effective.

What is needed then is an inner conviction on the part of the individual that he has to obey the rules of the school and that conviction is a matter of an individual's personality.

It becomes pertinent, therefore that the teacher in the classroom in Nigeria should be abreast with the technique of social therapy control. This technique according to Okpilike (2005) involves the application of a variety of clinical applied practices which attempt a sociological diagnosis in the treatment of group members.

In this case, the teacher uses his expertise from his discipline along with the client's own knowledge to decide which choices to pursue. The challenge to the teacher is therefore, to guide these pupils and students under him to learn which alternative choices are more beneficial than a current state and acting to bring one or more of those choices to reality.

CONCLUSION

The task of the classroom teacher in Nigeria from the primary through higher institution is enormous; the challenges are many. However, the teacher having been trained for a good number of years in the methodology of class control would have no option but to do well. In order to do well, he must be dedicated to the profession. Again, he must understand very well the nature of the job, try to understand the flexible nature of man and understand fully what he has to teach and how to teach it.

While the teacher is determined to do this, the Nigerian people should see the teacher as an important professional while government at the federal, state and local government levels should give the teaching profession the attention that it deserves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The business of education is a serious one. So, all hands must be on deck to make it succeed. To achieve this, the following recommendations are made:

- The federal government of Nigeria should properly and seriously fund education at all levels. The recommended 26% of a country's annual budget by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should be implemented.
- Schools should be properly built and equipped with modern facilities
- Classroom should be decongested. An average of 35-40 pupils/students per class is ideal for the primary and secondary schools
- Admission into the nation's higher institutions should be controlled. Larger lecture theatres and halls equipped with seats and modern communication gadgets are to be provided
- Teachers themselves should be taken care of adequately. Good offices should be provided for them while payment of salaries, promotions and regular workshops and seminars are to be encouraged

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